

South Dakota National Guard

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

South Dakota Guardsmen aid ISAF drawdown

By Staff Sgt. John Etheridge
ISAF Regional Command-South

KANDAHAR AIRFIELD, Afghanistan – As the convoy exited the military base after dark, the mood in the gun-truck was jovial, like a group of old friends starting out on a road trip. After spending nearly an hour listening to pre-convoy briefs and being sent off with a group prayer, the Soldiers were ready to go.

The vehicle was part of a six gun-truck security force consisting of Soldiers from the 1742nd Transportation Company, South Dakota Army National Guard, whose two-day mission was to escort nearly a dozen Afghan contractor semi-trailers to Forward Operating Base Apache, Zabul Province, Afghanistan, and return again to Kandahar Airfield on July 24.

The mission of the Sioux Falls and Flandreau, South Dakota-based unit was in direct support of operations to close outlying bases in Regional Command-South's area of Afghanistan as the International Security Assistance Force draws down their forces.

"Basically, we go to these outlying bases and work with the units there and haul their equipment away that needs to be taken out of theater and back to Kandahar," said Capt. Tyler Gerlach, 1742nd company commander. "Our mission is to support retrograde operations in ISAF Regional Command-South."

The 1742nd has been supporting these base closings, also known as retrograde operations, since they arrived in Afghanistan last February, said Gerlach, of Stickney, South Dakota.

Initially their convoys consisted of all military vehicles, but over the last couple of months, the 1742nd's missions have included Afghan civilian trucks, which the unit has had to adjust to.

"They have different timelines and maintenance expectations than we do," said Gerlach about some of the challenges of working with the contracted drivers.

Spc. Derek Swain, an assistant gunner with the 1742nd, said initially they had to work through cultural work differences with the local contracted drivers, but over time they seem to be getting better vehicles and drivers.

"We've had missions in the past where we've had to tow the civilian contractor vehicles up all of the hills," said Swain, of Tea, South Dakota. "But the trucks seem pretty good this time, and the drivers seem to know what they're doing."

After driving about five hours, the procession of vehicles finally reached FOB Apache. The military vehicles escorted their civilian counterparts onto the base and guided them to the loading zone.

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“We’re here to retrograde Apache and close it down over the next couple of weeks,” said Spc. Anthony Reed, the primary gunner for the convoy scout truck, and native of Sioux Falls, South Dakota. “We’re resupplying them with the essentials and taking out what they don’t need.”

Reed said that they loaded the contractor’s trucks with military combat vehicles, engineering equipment and other supplies destined for transport to Kandahar Airfield.

After loading the civilian semi-trailers, the Soldiers parked their vehicles in the convoy staging area and set up an improvised camp by tying tarps up between the vehicles and setting up cots for a night under the stars.

During the down time that lasted through morning and into late afternoon, the Soldiers of the 1742nd showed a strong camaraderie as they chatted, joked and helped each other with menial tasks around their makeshift camp.

“It’s kind of like working with my brothers and sisters for the most part. There are some days when you don’t get along, but we have a higher mission to do, and we aren’t here to squabble,” said Reed. “I know a lot of these guys outside of the Guard on a friend level, so it’s easy to work with them, and I respect them too.”

Later in the day, the drivers refueled their vehicles and formed the convoy again and headed down the road back to their home base. The contractor vehicles were all loaded down heavily meaning it would make for a longer and slower trip back to Kandahar Airfield.

In one of the gun trucks, the lighthearted banter on the truck’s internal communication system spared no one. The driver, truck commander, gunner and assistant gunner all joined in. Even the company commander, a passenger in the rear of the truck, reservedly joined in the repartee. The verbal exchanges went on for the next six hours, until the convoy made it to Kandahar Airfield, safely delivering the cargo.

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High resolution photos are available at www.flickr.com/photos/southdakotationalguard



140723-Z-BQ261-003: A Soldier with the 1742nd Transportation Company, South Dakota Army National Guard, bore sights his vehicle’s weapon system while preparing for a convoy July 22, 2014, at Kandahar Airfield, Afghanistan. The 1742nd regularly escorts contracted semi-trailers on convoys throughout southern Afghanistan as Regional Command-South closes outlying bases and draws down their forces. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. John Etheridge)



140723-Z-BQ261-041: Soldiers with the 1742nd Transportation Company, South Dakota Army National Guard, huddle together for a pre-convoy prayer July 22, 2014, at Kandahar Air Field, Afghanistan. The 1742nd regularly escorts contracted semi-trailers on convoys throughout southern Afghanistan as Regional Command-South closes outlying bases and draws down their forces. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. John Etheridge)



140724-Z-BQ261-051: A convoy escorted by the 1742nd Transportation Company, South Dakota Army National Guard, drives through the city of Qalat, Afghanistan, July 23, 2014, on their way to Kandahar Airfield. The 1742nd regularly escorts contracted semi-trailers on convoys throughout southern Afghanistan as Regional Command-South closes outlying bases and draws down their forces. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. John Etheridge)



140721-Z-BQ261-062: Soldiers with the 1742nd Transportation Company, South Dakota Army National Guard, practice evacuating a casualty from a vehicle during pre-convoy drills held July 21, 2014, at Kandahar Airfield, Afghanistan. The 1742nd's mission is to support transportation operations throughout southern Afghanistan as Regional Command-South closes outlying bases and draws down their forces. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. John Etheridge)

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